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DE RUEHBO #1552/01 1352019  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 152019Z MAY 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8715  
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8868  
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2190  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ MAY LIMA 7493  
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 3576  
RUEHSJ/AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE 5595  
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 8232  
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL 4901  
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RUCNDDTA/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1990  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1583  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 001552

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/15/2019  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [KCRM](#) [SMIG](#) [SNAR](#) [SOCI](#) [CO](#)  
SUBJECT: CODHES REPORT SPARKS RENEWED DEBATE ON  
DISPLACEMENT NUMBERS

REF: 08 BOGOTA 3506

Classified By: Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer Reasons  
1.4 (b and d)

#### SUMMARY

1. (U) A local human rights group--the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES)--recently reported a 24.5 percent increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2008. CODHES attributed the increase to GOC efforts to expand security, competition among illegal armed groups including new criminal bands, attacks by the FARC, and the GOC's aerial coca eradication. In contrast, GOC officials said IDP registrations showed only a slight increase in 2008, and rejected the CODHES report as unrealistic. They tied the small rise in official registrations to a recent Constitutional Court order to include IDPs from previous years in the official registry, as well as growing fraud as economic migrants seek the enhanced benefits now provided by the GOC to IDPs. Despite the difference in CODHES and GOC numbers, it is clear that violence continues to generate significant numbers of IDPs who need assistance. End Summary.

#### Displacement on the Rise

2. (U) CODHES recently reported an estimated 380,863 persons were forced to abandon their homes or jobs in 2008--a 24.5 percent increase over the previous year. The 2008 figure marks the second highest year on record after the 412,000 IDPs recorded by CODHES in 2002. This is the third straight year CODHES has reported an increase, with nearly 1 million displaced since 2006. CODHES estimates a total of 4.6 million persons have been displaced since 1985.

#### Vicious Cycle of Violence and Displacement

3. (U) The CODHES report identifies several factors behind the increase: 1) the GOC's continuing efforts to extend security throughout the country, 2) competition among illegal armed groups and the rising threat posed by new criminal organizations (including some paramilitaries that rearmed or never demobilized), 3) FARC attacks and threats against civilians, and 4) aerial coca eradication. CODHES asserts that despite the GOC's successes in improving security and targeting the FARC and other criminal groups, criminal organizations have shifted to new geographic areas and are

using violence and intimidation against rural residents to secure land and labor to support their illicit activities.

#### International Organizations also Report Increase

¶4. (U) The 2008 annual report from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also showed a 10 percent increase in the number of IDPs the organization helped in 2008. ICRC cited an increase in the number of individual displacements caused by threats from new criminal groups as a contributing factor. ICRC reported that as fighting between the Colombian military and illegal armed groups has shifted towards more remote mountainous and jungle areas and toward the Pacific coast, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have been particularly affected. In 2008, 22 percent of families assisted by ICRC belonged to ethnic minority groups.

¶5. (C) Jean Noel Wetterwald, country representative for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), agreed that there was improved security in cities and towns, but noted conditions have deteriorated in rural areas. The GOC's legitimate and necessary campaign to confront illegal armed groups, new criminal groups, and narco-traffickers has produced more IDPs. UNHCR's analysis of the GOC's official registry shows that 10 departments accounted for 69 percent of displacement. The departments most affected were Magdalena (31,644), Narino (26,389), and Antioquia (21,012), which together accounted for 31 percent of the total number of IDPs in 2008. Wetterwald predicted that the high number

of displacements will continue in 2009.

#### Government Rejects CODHES Report as Unrealistic

¶6. (U) GOC officials publicly reject the CODHES report as unrealistic and question the group's methodology. This public push back has been notably stronger than in the past. GOC statistics showed a slight increase in 2008 with 372,333 IDP registrations--up 3.5 percent over the previous year. Still, the GOC attributed the rise to a recent Court order to include IDPs from all previous years in the official registry, as well as a growing cottage industry promoting fraudulent displacement claims.

¶7. (U) In June 2008, the Council of State, a part of the Colombian administrative judiciary, nullified the government's one-year time limit for making a displacement declaration. In January of this year, the Constitutional Court ordered Accion Social, the presidential agency responsible for IDP assistance programs, to review the official registry and to add persons displaced in previous years. As a result, Accion Social says more than one-third of IDP claims included in 2008 statistics correspond to displacement that occurred in previous years--with 104,000 coming from before 1997.

¶8. (C) Accion Social director Luis Alfonso Hoyos told EmbOffs and visiting Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) officials that fraud is a big factor behind the increase in the GOC's IDP numbers. Better access and improved IDP programs have created an incentive for economic migrants and others to take advantage of the system. The government now has 36 inter-agency IDP orientation and assistance centers (Unidades de Atencion y Orientacion - UAO in Spanish) providing services to many of the 2.9 million IDPs on the official registry. Accion Social has detected a syndicate of lawyers and others that advise people on how to qualify for government assistance. The lawyers sell fraudulent document packages and prep applicants in what to say in order to qualify.

¶9. (C) Viviana Ferro, director of IDP programs at Accion Social, estimates that approximately 50 percent of displacement claims recently included in the GOC's registry were likely fraudulent but were given the benefit of the doubt. ICRC delegate Christophe Beney told us the ICRC is concerned that it is encountering more economic migrants

presenting false claims, but said it is difficult to say how many. Roberto Mignone, deputy representative for UNHCR, agreed that the government accepted many fraudulent IDP claims, but pointed out that the sub-registration of IDPs (those who do not register for reasons of fear, lack of access, etc) likely offset this distortion.

#### If Violence is Down, Why is Displacement Up?

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¶10. (U) GOC officials contend it is counter-intuitive that IDPs continue to soar while almost all other security and socio-economic indicators (homicides, kidnappings, economic activity) continue to improve. In recent remarks about the GOC's budget increase for displacement programs (up to COP \$1 billion pesos or about USD \$434 million per year), President Uribe conceded that much displacement was generated by violence, but called for further analysis to look at other causes such as regional migration. Leading local columnist Alfredo Rangel agreed that the IDP numbers must be skewed given GOC success in improving security and reducing violence. The GOC fears the extraordinary pressure generated by including cases from previous years--coupled with rising fraud--could collapse the IDP assistance system and leave those with an immediate and valid need without help.

¶11. (U) In addition to fraud and registration of past IDPs, the disparity in displacement numbers also reflects the different methodologies used by CODHES and Accion Social. CODHES estimates the number of IDPs by collecting data from: 1) national and local press; 2) reports from local

governmental institutions, international and nongovernmental organizations, academics, and the Catholic Church; and 3) field visits. CODHES numbers include migrants fleeing drug eradication efforts and poor economic conditions resulting from the conflict. In contrast, Accion Social data only includes those displaced by the FARC and ELN, paramilitaries, confrontations between the Colombian military and illegal armed groups, and by some new criminal groups. Despite the differences, it is clear that violence continues to generate large numbers of IDPs who need assistance.

Nichols